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ABSTRACT

Intended for teachers in Tasminia, this book focuses on the school setting as a place that supports children as language users. The booklet suggests that when setting out to develop a language program teachers need a knowledge of the relationship between child development and language acquisition; an understanding of how the organization of the learning environment can promote language development; and a means of evaluating the effectiveness of the language program. The booklet contains three chapters: Children and Language; Organization of the Learning Environment; and Evaluation of the Language Program. Numerous black and white photographs illustrate the text. (MG)

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A SCHOOL IS A LANGUAGE PLACE

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Children and Language
A SCHOOL IS A LANGUAGE PLACE

Education Department, Tasmania

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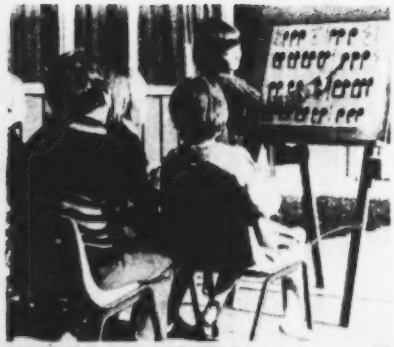

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reading
writing
dancing
modelling
speaking
playing
listening

singing

imagining

Introduction

A school, like many other places where people meet and talk, is a language place. At school, children express themselves, communicate with others and allow others to communicate with them through activities involving language. How effective a school is as a language place will depend on both planned and unplanned language activities. Teachers should use the opportunities that arise spontaneously to develop children's language. They should also plan for children's language development in a way that reflects an understanding of what makes learning enjoyable and uncomplicated for children. In doing so they need to draw on their understanding of children's growth and development. They need to be able to appraise the child's language performance and they need to be aware of the child's interests. Thus when setting out to develop a language program teachers need:

- a knowledge of the relationship between child development and language acquisition;
- an understanding of how the organisation of the learning environment can promote language development; and
- a means of evaluating the effectiveness of the language program.

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1 Children and language

nguage is always about something, it involves self and others d it is always for a purpose. So there are three inter-related pects of language to consider: content, audience and purpose.

ne content a child is able to handle depends very much on that ild's experiences and interests. Children may be competent in ne content area and not in others. Teachers should give ildren access to experiences that broaden the range of things talk, read and write about.

These experiences may include:

- people: themselves, their family, their friends, their heroes, their neighbours;
- material things: the things of their world, and the relationships between these things;
- things of the mind: feelings, ideas, hopes, fears, desires.

Sometimes children will be concerned with reality and sometimes with the world of their imagination.

As children use language they become aware of audience. They learn how to tell if they are being understood, how to interpret responses from other people and how to respond themselves. Children need audiences for their talking and writing. Teachers are one important audience but children also need other adults and other children to respond to them.

There are many ways for teachers to provide audiences for children: allowing them to share their thoughts, both oral and written, with other children, planning situations that bring other adults into the classroom, and setting up situations that require role-playing in the classroom. Taking children into the community and setting up situations that require children to make their own contact with the community are ways of providing audiences outside the classroom. Finally, encouraging parents to continue their participation in children's language learning helps make the maximum use of a readily available audience.

Language is always used to serve some purpose. It may be to express self, to interact with others or to share information. Just as the use of language changes to meet the demands of audience and subject, it also changes to suit the purpose of the user.

Language enables us to record, report, generalise, hypothesise and respond imaginatively to our thoughts, feelings and experiences. It enables us to think about:

what is happening
what happened
what always happens
what might happen, and why
what if

The thought processes involved in these language activities are identifying, sequencing, categorising, hypothesising and

imagining. Children can handle these processes from an early age. They can generate hypotheses beginning with speculation about the concrete world. With age and experience, they move to abstraction.

Children's ability to identify, sequence, classify and so on will develop only if they find themselves in situations which demand that these processes occur. Through their questioning, teachers can encourage this development and hence a wider use of language. Questions such as 'What might happen?', 'What if...?' and 'Why?' require children to use more complex language structures. It is only if they are involved in situations which call for a range of uses that children are able to extend and refine their use of language.

Children need to take some responsibility for their own learning. To help them to do this they need a teacher who:

- plans for and provides many activities and the space, time and materials to follow their interests;
- is a person who is interested in their concerns, who knows when to challenge, direct, influence, inspire and when to leave well alone;
- is an adult listener who knows when to say 'Why', 'What if', or 'Let's pretend';
- will help solve problems when help is needed;
- is concerned with their day-to-day needs yet keeps in mind long-term goals;
- continually evaluates the appropriateness of the language program and adjusts it so that needs and goals are met.

To be effective in promoting children's language development teachers should know something about language. They should be able to recognise the kinds of language that are being used in their classrooms. They should know what they might reasonably expect in terms of broad patterns of language growth and know what kinds of situations will best lead to different language uses. In order to do this, teachers should bear in mind some basic principles underlying the development of language.

Language is not a collection of little bits

Children develop language skills through active use. The teaching of such skills in isolation is pointless. Everything teachers do with children has the potential for developing the use of language. The teaching of the conventions of written language, such as spelling, punctuation, etc., will be more successful if such teaching arises naturally from the activities children are currently engaged in.

For example, Margaret an animal lover and eager conservationist at eleven, was writing to the Prime Minister about the killing of seal pups. 'It's got to be a proper letter', she explained anxiously to her teacher. The conventions of letter writing were explained and the letter was written. Later letters showed a familiarity with these conventions.

Children will learn and remember best when the new knowledge or skill serves a current need. The important thing for teachers to do is to treat all aspects of language as an entity and to recognise that all skills can be learned within this context.

Children learn to use language in situations that are lively and relevant to them

Children learn language by using it in real situations. A situation is real when the language used has a purpose. Examples of real situations and the purposes served could include:

- planning the most interesting route for a class walk around a local area – i.e., **solving a problem;**
- reading the instructions for the use of a microscope – **finding out something;**
- listening to someone else read a story – **gaining pleasure;**
- telling someone else how to use the overhead projector – **sharing information, boosting self-image;**
- writing a suggestion for improvements to the school playground – **influencing others;**
- taking part in a school council meeting – **getting things done.**

Real situations for language use also abound when interest and imagination are stimulated. Excursions offer many opportunities for children to talk, think, read and write, as is shown in this description of one group's work. The occasion was a visit to an old churchyard to make rubbings from tombstones.

During the excursion the children:

- discussed unusual names (Ruby, Percival, etc.);
- worked out people's ages from birth and death dates;
- wondered why so many children and babies died in those days;
- wondered what life was like 100 years ago;
- talked about the possible stories behind some of the inscriptions;
- tried to work out how the engraving was done, noticed and compared different styles of lettering;
- swapped ghost stories and personal 'when I was frightened' anecdotes;
- found a 'cubby' and played at being bushrangers.

Comparing, speculating and predicting are important aspects of language development.

Relating new experiences to past experiences helps consolidate learning.

Imaginative play is a legitimate and relevant way of learning.

Back at school the children:

- displayed their rubbings and talked to others about them;
- brought along old tools and curios for display; read and talked about how they were used;
- listened to a grandfather talk about his boyhood experience as a stable-hand;
- wrote, collected and read ghost stories and made a book of them;
- used role-play to develop a drama set on a big farm, far from a town, in the late 1880s;
- researched, read and wrote in relation to the drama;
- found out about and practised different kinds of lettering.

Listening skills are developed when children want to hear.

Attention to spelling is highly relevant when work is to be published.

The writing, reading, talking and listening which happen in role-play have real purpose and real audiences.

Research is best directed at finding out for a purpose.

Possible future directions for this class might include a visit to a colonial homestead, a convict settlement or a stonemason.

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'alk is the primary mode of language on which ll others depend

alk is the basic form of language. Reading and writing both ave their basis in talk. People spend more time listening and alking than they do reading and writing. The quality of nildren's understanding of their experiences is enhanced if ey have opportunities to talk about their experiences.

alk is the language form in which most children have the reatest competence. It is the only language means that young nildren have for communicating ideas of any complexity and r receiving the ideas of others. So when children are learning mething new, the learning is facilitated if opportunities for alking about it are encouraged. This is particularly so where nildren are learning to read and write. Not until the later years of the primary school are reading and writing so well established that they, too, can become a means of communicating complex ideas.

Written language styles with which children are not familiar need first to be experienced orally. Listening to 'book language' helps children to read such language. For example, if children are to read a legend or a myth and they are not familiar with this literary form, it helps if they have first listened to some myths or legends. This principle applies when new material is presented in any subject area.

A child's talk can provide insights for a teacher. By listening to a child's questions and comments the teacher can build up a picture of what the child is learning from the experiences provided.

'The effect of any talk will depend on the purposes for which it is being used, the context in which it takes place and the ideas and values which are being promoted.'

- Joan Tough

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2 Organisation of the learning environment

The learning environment is more than just the physical space in which children learn. It comprises:

PEOPLE children, teachers and other adults
PLACES for learning, for sharing, for being alone, for doing
MATERIALS to talk about, to write about, to read, to paint, to model or draw, to play with
TIME for talking, for thinking, for reading and writing, for choosing and deciding

It is difficult to think about any one of these aspects in isolation. When thinking about space in which things are to happen, consideration must also be given to time and people and materials. Much planning can be done beforehand but there always will be a need for adjustments as the program proceeds. As children's responses to different situations are evaluated, the learning environment is adjusted to meet the children's needs. This section is about the four aspects of organisation which must come together to form the learning environment.

People: other adults, other children

A good language program recognises the vital role that other language users play in children's language development. In a school, children are part of an interacting community. One of the ways teachers can enrich the quality of this interaction is to involve their children in experiences with a range of older and younger people. Children need adults and other children to talk to, to listen to and to share their experiences with.

Parents and other adults can become valued members of the classroom. They can provide the varieties of adult models that are necessary for promoting effective communication. Other adults can do this by talking and listening, sharing experiences, sharing special skills, telling or reading stories, playing games and writing for and with children. Careful planning is required to ensure that the involvement of other adults is supportive of the aims of the total language program.

Children also need to share their ideas with other children. Working in small groups is the best way to facilitate this interaction. Keeping the group small helps to ensure that all children have an opportunity to participate. It allows for the deeper involvement that increases children's opportunities to communicate effectively.

Teachers need to help the group focus on purposes and procedures and provide relevant questions when necessary. The responsibilities for group participation should be discussed with children. These responsibilities include such things as showing respect for other members, staying with the topic or task, being willing to participate, recognising that different members contribute in different ways and recognising that every contribution merits a response.

Some grouping may be done by the teacher and some will be child-initiated. There is

no one best way that suits every situation. Very often the nature of the activity will determine the nature of the groups that are formed. Grouping should be flexible and based on children's interests and on their social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs. This means that groups within the classroom, and to some extent within the school, will change.

One major advantage of small group work is that a wider range of language is possible in the talk that accompanies the work. Children have opportunities to take on a variety of roles (initiating, clarifying, summarising) and these roles require that children develop a variety of language styles. As well as promoting wider language use, small groups enable a teacher to give more individual help to children, especially if they are not all doing the same thing at the same time.

'It would be sad . . . if we ever forgot that the warmth and fun of human relationships lie at the heart of all good teaching.'

– *Richard Palmer*

Places: the school, the community

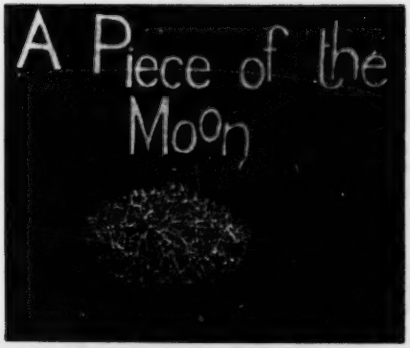
Teachers' use of space will have an impact on the quality and range of learning opportunities available to children. It is each teacher's responsibility to plan for the best use of the learning environment. Children should be encouraged to use the library, corridors and other areas inside and outside the school.

Every teacher needs to be concerned that the school **develops as a cohesive learning environment.** Space should be organised so that all learning areas are part of a considered plan and teachers must involve themselves in planning the use of available space. When children move outside the classroom for learning, they will need the support of all the people around them: teachers, the principal, older children and parents.

The learning environment extends into the world outside the school grounds. There are interesting people and exciting things in every community. Children learn best about their community through contact with it and this should involve more than the occasional major excursion.

Teachers should plan to use the community when it can provide situations and people that are relevant to their children's current needs and interests. The classroom provides the base for all of these learning experiences. Children will spend most of their time inside the classroom. The space needed for learning will vary for different activities so classroom space must be flexible. It may be necessary to rearrange working spaces to meet the demands of children's changing interests. By taking time to observe the classroom layout in operation, teachers should be able to make changes that result in the most appropriate and efficient use of the learning environment.

materials



people

places

time

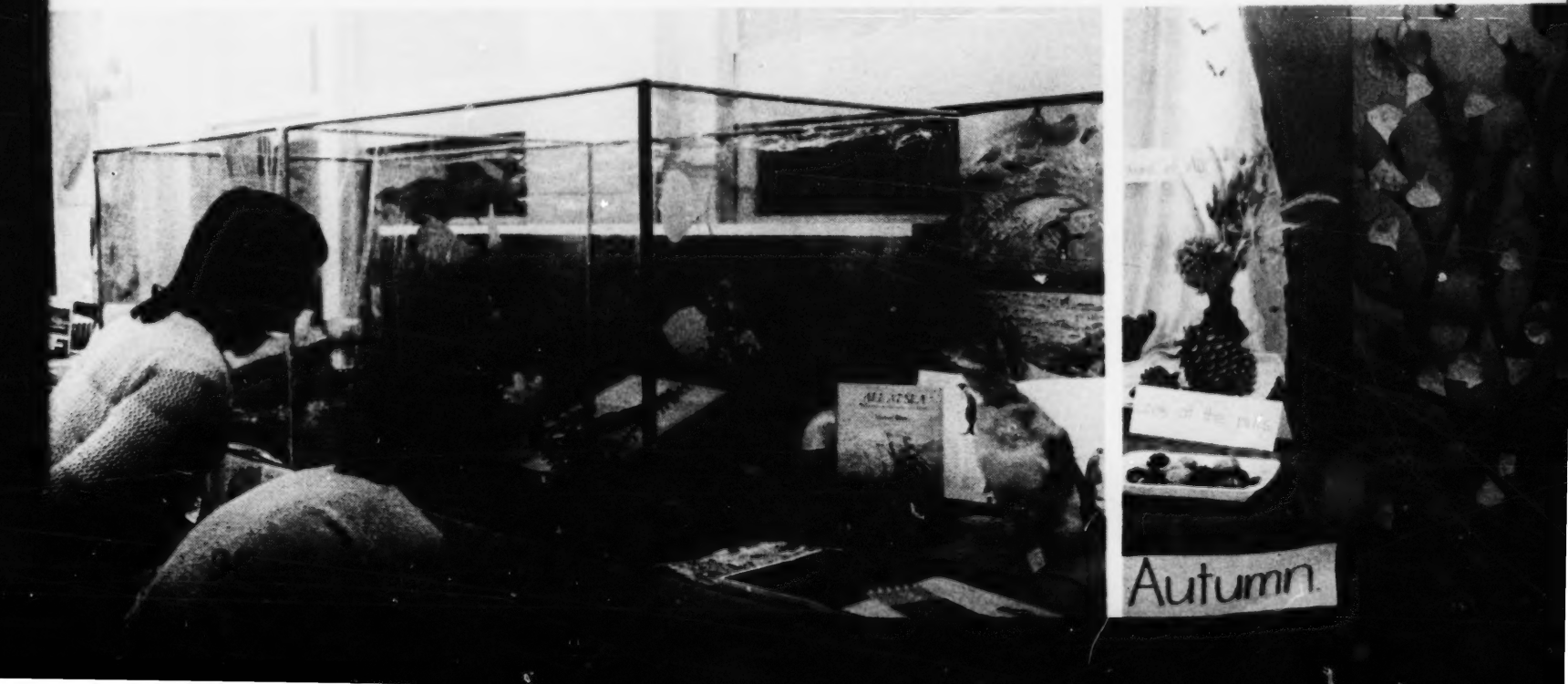
Materials: display

The quality of the environment is important. The value placed on the aesthetic appeal of the classroom is demonstrated by the care taken in choosing and arranging the furniture and materials in it.

The way teachers respond to children's work is important so how things are displayed is **very** important. Children need to be able to see, to touch and to talk about the things that are displayed around them.

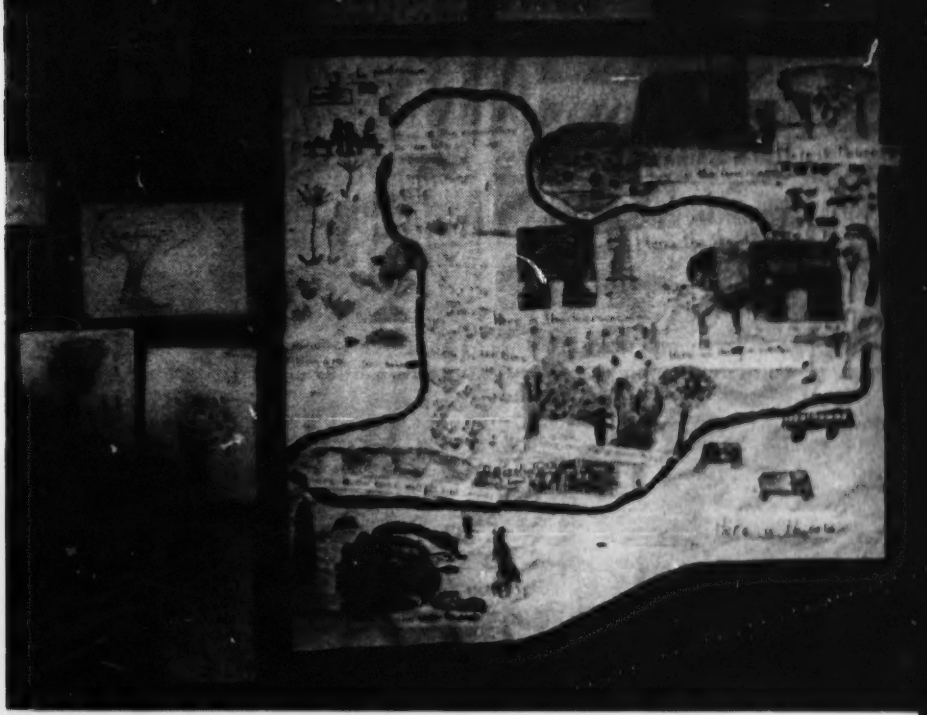
Elements of design are inherent in display. Colour, line, texture and composition are important for the contribution they make to the effectiveness of the display. By sharing in the arrangement of materials, children come to appreciate these aspects of design.

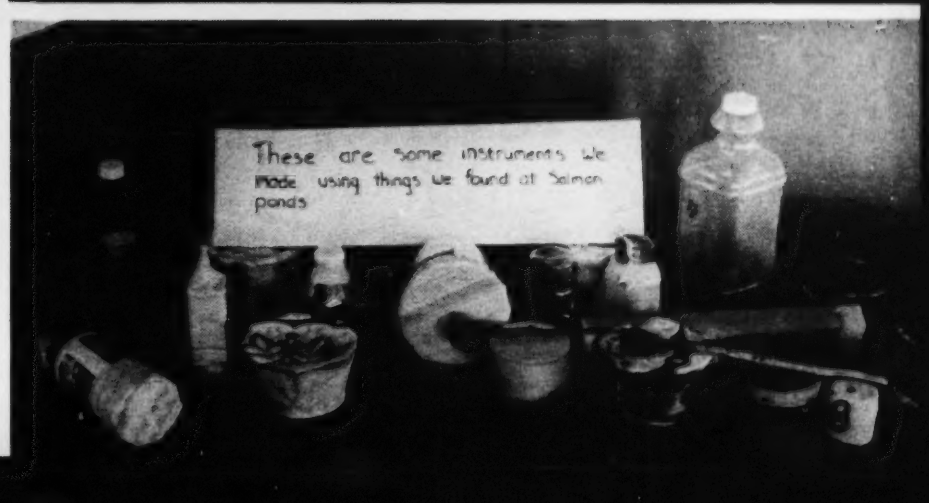
The environment should excite, interest and give pleasure but the visual impact should not overwhelm. Children will respond more readily to the learning environment when they have participated in its arrangement. It is essential that children are involved.



Good display should:

- stimulate talking, listening, observing and responding;
- emerge from or lead into children's interests and needs;
- demonstrate to children that their efforts are valued;
- be appropriate for the medium of expression that has been used by the child; and
- take into account a child's perceptions of the world.





Materials: access

Materials are important to the language program. Not only do children learn from materials such as books, magazines and tapes, children also need a wide variety of other materials to help them express their ideas, feelings and imaginings. Materials for self-expression should be as readily available as printed materials.

Good organisation of these materials is essential. The responsibility for care and storage should be shared by the teacher and the children. Children will better appreciate the value of materials if they are involved in their selection and maintenance.

Materials should be stored so that children can find and return them without having to move a great deal of other equipment or disturb other people. Having children wait in long lines to select materials holds up the learning process and so does having to wait while books or papers are given out. Each child will need a place to store personal supplies but this need not necessarily be a desk: tote trays, bins or bags can also serve this purpose.

Being able to find what is needed when it is needed is important. Children need time, opportunity and help to learn how to do this. Some materials are used all the time: these ought to be stored so that access to them is no problem for children.

Other materials can be kept in places outside the classroom. For example, the best place for storing books is in a library, where they can be organised so that finding them is no problem. The librarian will know the range and content of books available in the school and will be able to arrange bulk loans as needed. Organising in this way means that classroom storage is available for the books and materials that reflect children's current interests and for those materials which need to be readily available.

Time: for children

Children need time to
think and feel
discover and plan
experience and explore
express and create
reflect and reason
wonder and speculate
play and communicate
do the many things that interest them

Learning takes time. How much time depends on what is being learned, what is already known about it and how interesting it is. In the classroom, children will not all be ready for the same learning at the same time and they will require different amounts of time for learning. If teachers plan for half-hour units of work some children may have no more to learn from the session after ten minutes, some children may find the time adequate and some children may have just begun when the time allowed comes to an end.

When planning time for learning, teachers must put children's needs first. This can mean allowing children to take as much time as they need on an activity; it can mean helping them to decide when to put something aside for a while; it can also mean allowing them to do things in an order that suits them.

Often children will come back to an activity in which they have previously shown no interest. This is because being interested depends on there being a connection between the task and their own readiness to learn. Sometimes children will pore over a book for hours and come back to it again and again because there is still something there for them to learn or to enjoy.

Learning to use language involves children in making decisions. For example, there is more than one meaning for many words and there are many ways to state any idea. Teachers should offer a variety of activities based on the aims of the language program and children's needs. They then have to help children to see the choices and make decisions. If children have practice in making decisions about their learning they are more likely to develop self-direction and responsibility. A flexible learning program allows the time for this to happen.

> 'Time is more important than a timetable . . . the tight control of time leads almost inevitably to instructions on what has to be done when, for how long and when to stop.'
>
> - *Harold Rosen*

When planning a language program it is not enough to consider the external environment, the materials in the classroom, the groupings of children or the content of the curriculum. Teachers' attitudes to children, to learning and to language are vital. These attitudes are reflected in the way teachers operate and evaluate their learning programs.

3 Evaluation of the language program

Children's language development must be looked at in a total context rather than in fragmented subject areas. Evaluation of language development must take into account such things as children's thinking and creativity, their acceptance of responsibility and their development towards self-direction.

Teachers should try to determine the effectiveness of the language program in meeting the needs of each child. They should look at such things as what has been learned, what children can do, how much better they can do it now than before, what children know, what this knowledge means to them and what they need to learn next.

Observing and evaluating how children grow as users of language is an important part of teaching. Such appraisal is concerned with the individual child because each child changes and matures uniquely in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Daily informal observation of children's language performance will provide teachers with useful information. Such observation, undertaken while children are engaged in everyday language activities, can form the basis of evaluation. Through observation, teachers can determine the specific situations that promote more effective listening and talking. Observation also helps

teachers in making a record of each child's development. Teachers should note when a child has used reading both for practical purposes and for pleasure, and when there is improvement in a child's ability to communicate in either speech or writing. The information gained guides teachers in designing instruction, particularly in response to children's special needs.

Such information cannot be gained from group tests. Standardised tests do not give sufficient information to enable teachers to appraise the language development of each child or the effectiveness of the language program.

Teachers should keep individual records of their observations. The form teachers use for recording will vary but such records should include notes on significant developments in a child's language skills. Records can also include samples of children's work collected over time, lists of books read, topics talked, written or read about, and inventories of specific skills.

Individual records should be useful. There is no point in collecting information about children if the information does not influence teachers' planning or their response to children. Such information also should be of value when teachers are communicating with parents and others concerned with the child's welfare.

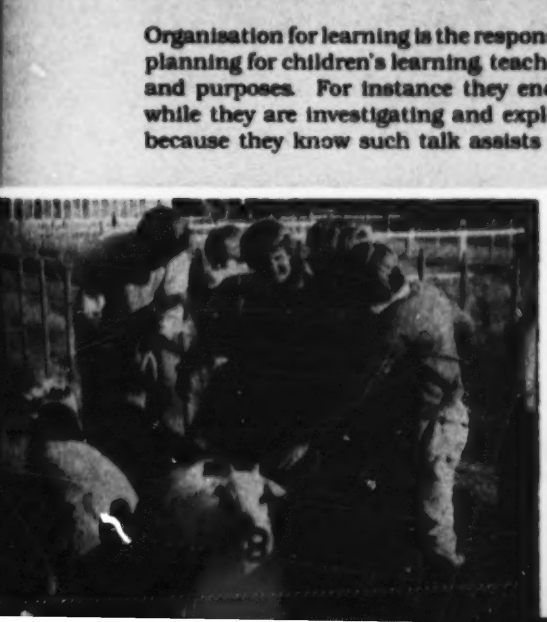
Teachers should consider the broad and specific goals they have in language development. They should regularly review the language program to determine its effectiveness in meeting these goals and the needs of children.

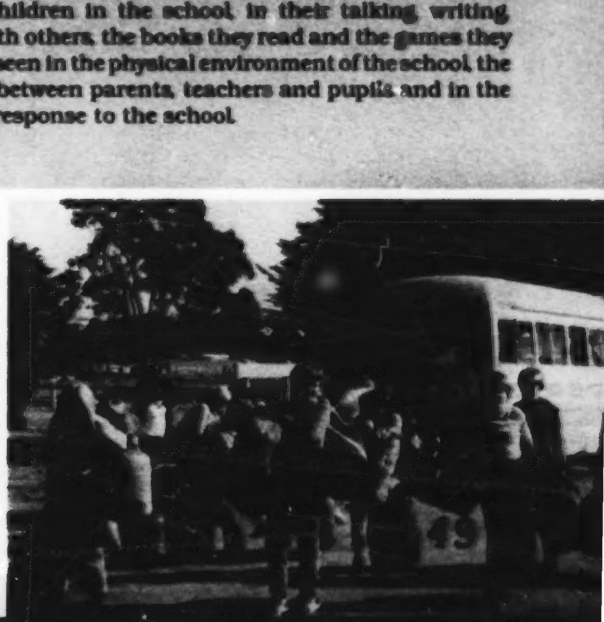
Conclusion

Children will develop best as language users and receivers where language is recognised as being fundamental to learning. Language programs must be based on the inter-relatedness of all aspects of language. Programs that segregate language into separate slots in a timetable impose upon the learner the entire responsibility for integrating the 'bits and pieces' of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and other language skills. Organising in this way overlooks the fundamental principle that the child learns best when there is a purpose for learning.

Organisation for learning is the responsibility of teachers. When planning for children's learning, teachers have in mind reasons and purposes. For instance they encourage children to talk while they are investigating and exploring their environment because they know such talk assists learning. Children may have other purposes: they talk to find out, to clarify and to share their thoughts with one another.

A school is only one of the places where children learn to use language and use language to learn. The difference is that in a school the planning for such learning is conscious and active. Teachers need to undertake such planning carefully, as well as be able to respond appropriately to unplanned situations. The effects of careful planning will be seen in the interests and activities of children in the school, in their talking, writing, interaction with others, the books they read and the games they play. It will be seen in the physical environment of the school, the relationships between parents, teachers and pupils, and in the community's response to the school.





Children and Language

Books in this Series:

DEVELOPING A LANGUAGE PROGRAM

A SCHOOL IS A LANGUAGE PLACE

UNDERSTANDING READING AND WRITING

CHILDREN AND BOOKS

PARENTS, CHILDREN AND LANGUAGE

CHILDREN, LANGUAGE AND THE ARTS

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